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ABSTRACT

The neighborhood oral history project described in this report was a course assignment in American History used at the Austin Campus of Houston Community College in an effort to make the study of history relevant to a non-traditional, predominantly Hispanic student body. The report first presents background information, describing the Hispanic community served by the college and noting the fact that few of its students had had positive educational experiences. After discussing the irrelevance of traditional history texts to the cultural identity of these students, the report describes the oral history assignment as an alternative means of instruction and details the assignment's requirements. Students were expected to perform initial research on a decade in the 20th century; develop and review a list of interview questions dealing with events in that decade; use these questions in an interview with a community resident; and complete a final paper evaluating the interview in terms of the reliability of the information obtained and the relation of the interviewee's experiences to the larger societal experience of the period. The report concludes with highlights from some of the interviews and a summary of students' responses to the assignment. (JP)

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THE COMMUNITY: EDUCATION ON A GRASSROOTS LEVEL

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Paper presented at the National Conference on Educational Alternatives for a Changing Society (Miami, FL, January 28-30, 1981).

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Carol Ann Brown

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The greatest challenge facing education in the 1980's is its ability to survive in a rapidly changing society. It has become apparent that over the last two decades fundamental shifts have been occurring in American society. Martoriani and Kuhns, in Managing for Academic Change, point out the focus for academia must be to change and adapt to these shifts. For education, these shifts have resulted in the increasing power of the consumers of education rather than its producers.[1]

Edmund Gleazer, President of the American Association for Community and Junior Colleges, feels the greatest danger for education will come from "routine, from following predictable patterns of activities or...refusing to grow."[2] Survival can mean merely hanging on. Every college has been re-examining its programs and degree and admission requirements. Yet education must not look at these changes with fear but with excitement. Change must mean a commitment to vitality; education must take the initiative, be creative and be hopeful in what the decade can bring for it.

I feel very fortunate, for I believe I am a part of the vanguard of educational leadership. As Gleazer mentions, community colleges are in the "catbird seat" in post-secondary education. The direction and interest in higher education are placing the community colleges in an advantageous position. My own college, HCCS, is an excellent example. While the spectre of declining enrollment faces many four-year institutions in the state, the college in eight years has grown from a few thousand students to over 30,000. We are now one of the largest institutions of higher education in the State of Texas. The reasons for its rapid growth are similar to those of other community colleges in the nation. The college has reached out into the community to bring a "new type of student" into higher education. As an open-door institution, educational access is now being given to minorities, blue-collar youth and women--groups which have had limited opportunity for post-secondary education.

As the college reaches out to these students, it also becomes a part of their communities. We have 22 campus locations throughout the city. The college has established its primary purpose to be the provision of educational opportunities for adults who desire and need its services. It is dedicated to serving the diverse needs of the

Houston community, through its flexibility, accessibility and quality of instruction. By reaching out to these individual communities, the college has had to adapt to the needs of each individual environment. As we try to reach the goal of these needs, an interfusion of our institution with all aspects of community life has begun to occur.[3]

For many of our students the community college represents the opportunity to begin lifelong education. Our students are only part-time formal learners. We share them with other commitments, which at times take precedence over their academic responsibilities. Forty-three per cent of our students have indicated they went to college because it is ten miles or less from their home. Community colleges have become recognized as academic proving grounds for these students, students whose previous experiences with the educational system have been negative ones. We must not only opn the door for them but give them the opportunity to fulfill their potential.

Relating to these new students has placed us in a unique situation. I have found that traditional modes and forms of education have little utility in my teaching environment. More often than not, the faculty at HCCS

seems to be guided less by formal education textbooks and more by the UNESCO report Learning to Be goal: "Teaching, contrary to traditional ideas and practices, should adapt itself to the learner; the learner should not have to bow to pre-established rules for teaching."[4]

Each semester we are asked to teach in two areas of the city: the East(representing minority groups) and the West(representing Anglo middle-class). Under this system I was presented with the opportunity to teach at the Austin campus located on the East side of town. This area is called the Segundo Barrio(or Second Ward). Originally, Houston was divided into six wards for political purposes. The city has grown out from them, and these wards now represent the core of the city. The population of the wards is 50% to 90% minority.

The Second Ward is typical of the older sections of the city. The area has the highest concentration of Hispanics in the city: 80% of the population is Mexican-American. Like many inner city neighborhoods, the face of the area has changed considerably over the last twenty years. Over half the homes in the area have been replaced

by light industry and commercial businesses. In spite of this change, Hispanic ties run deep here. The average period of permanent residence in the area is 10-15 years. This longevity has provided Mexican-Americans with an anchor in a period of rapid growth and change in the city. Many residents in the Second War view it as their own self-contained community. Petra Gullen, a resident since 1922, depicts that sense of belonging and pride. When asked how she felt about being surrounded by industry, she replied, "Once I get home to my neighborhood, even if it's ugly, it's home."[5]

There are two churches in the area: Our Lady of Guadalupe(1911) and the Church of the Redeemer. Both have active community-oriented programs to reach out to the community and offer stability. Membership in both churches has recently been rising. The Ripley House is a community service center located in the middle of the ward. It offers health, education and social services to the area. It works closely with city, state and education organizations in providing for the needs of the population.

The student population at the Austin campus was a microcosm of the neighborhood. Over 75% of the students were Hispanic. The average age was 25 on up. Their educational and economic backgrounds were diverse. A sizable group

were women returning to school after having begun families. These students faced enromous pressures at home in an environment that places little value on mobility for females. Others were Hispanic men, many were veterans and first-generation individuals, beginning to achieve moderate economic success as opportunities in oil refineries, the Post Office and major department stores became available to them. The Blacks and Anglos in the class were from similar backgrounds.

There were few students who had had positive educational experiences before entering the community college. Many expressed disenchantment with the educational process and yet all of them were convinced education was their major avenue to success in society. Many students had educational goals that were aligned to economic rewards, being real estate, marketing and business majors.

History 1302, American History 1877 to the present, is the second half of the year of American history required for any degree plan. There were few students in the course because they loved history. All students enter college history believing it is another repetition of the facts they have been hearing since elementary school. The students at Austin entered my 1302 course with that belief and

the conviction that the history of textbooks and historians had little to do with them. There was little material in our text which provided information about their culture, values and contribution to the development of American history:

Immigration was only a migration from Eastern and Southern Europe;

Assimilation of most groups had been successful in American society;

The heroes identified were those whose actions were seen overtly by all society;

The World War II section did not once mention the heavy percentage of Hispanic enlistments into the Armed Services.

Thus I faced a dilemma--a dual-edged sword. The students were alienated by the nature of the course and potentially by the course content. It did not appear that many of them could share in a common past with the larger society. The norms, values and mores of their cultural group might not have a place in a historical and academic context. They were ready for another failed experience with American education.

I, on the other hand, confronted a dilemma. I did not want my student to agree with Henry Ford that "history is more or less bunk." I wanted them to see that history went beyond just what happened, that it included also who it happened to and why it had happened. I wanted them to understand that history was not just the past, it was a pathway to the future. The past, present and future had a place for these students' values, mores and the contributions of their culture. I wanted them to understand that history is a part of the evolving of human culture, a culture that included them.

But I also had academic requirements for the course that included reading assignments, testing and essays. Most of these students had not entered the course with academic backgrounds that would have allowed easy mastery of these requirements. Their educational deficiencies could have become another factor in their lack of interest in the course.

I had to develop a structure for my curriculum that would provide these students with the general information background of this course. At the same time, this curriculum had to aid these students in enhancing their ethnic self-image. I hoped this would be accomplished by making them aware that the values and experiences of

their particular community played an important role in the general context of historical events.

As I began to plan the project I was reminded of the Stanford faculty committee report in 1976 on Reform and Renewal of Liberal Education. The report had stated:

> The University must introduce students to new areas, ideas and works, while also providing them with the general informational background and vocabulary of the tradition from which almost all of them come...(The students) must recognize how different historical situations shape what it is possible for people to do and be and must understand what it means to live with traditions different from one's own, with similar traditions and with no single effective tradition.[6]

An oral history project of their neighborhood seemed to be the instructional technique that would allow for learning to occur from direct experience. It could take learning out of the classroom and into their own world. It could be the bridge between the passive learning of the classroom(which was important) and the action learning of the environment around them. The history curriculum would become integrated with human culture. The objective was to

have the students realize "...outputs of the past... have contemporary significance because those who experienced or produced them were our forefathers."[7] As Talcott Parsons has written, "a distinctive identity is rooted in a distinctive sense of history."[8] They would acquire a sense of a shared history with the greater society. I hoped the project would create a supportive learning environment--one that would perpetuate a motivation for learning not only in history but in other courses as well.

I began the project first by familiarizing myself with the area. I mentioned the possibility of doing an oral history of the Second Ward to leading members of the community, including a bank official, the Ripley House and the director of the Austin campus. These initial contacts brought suggested names to interview. I read what was available in the area, including city planning reports. I presented the project to the class as one of several projects that could be done as part of the course's requirements. The discussion began with an explanation of oral history. I mentioned the Columbia University Oral History Project. I had written to Louis Starr, project director, and he had sent back information and advice on how the paper could be accomplished. I read selections from Studs Terkel's Working to the class. We discussed why oral history was an important part of putting the pieces of history together. As Page Smith, in The Historian and History, defines it:

> Great history, the history that has commanded man's hearts and minds, has always been narrative history, history with a story to tell that illuminates the truth of the human situation, that lifts spirits and projects new potentialities. The detailed analytical history that is the standard product of our academies has little to say to the ordinary man.[9]

The students were told that the project was not just to grab a cassette and let their grandmother talk. They were to pick a decade in the twentieth century to ask their interviewee about. They were required to research the time period with at least two sources. They were to draw up a list of questions and then we would review them. The questions were to draw out what the individual's experience in the time period had been. Some emphasis was to be given to the neighborhood as well.

Once the tape was completed, they were to have a written paper that included an introduction, detailing who they were, an outline of the tape, a written set of questions and a short evaluation of the taping. The evaluation had to include their analysis of what they learned from the interview, how reliable the information was (based on the reading) and how the

interviewee's experience related to the larger societal experience of the period. As an example, if the Depression was being discussed, did the interviewee receive any benefits from New Deal legislation? If he did was it related to his economic or ethnic status in society? Were descriptions of major political figures colored by the individual's status in society?

Discussion of the project in class brought many suggestions as to who should be interviewed. Jointly, it was decided to have as wide a representation of the area as possible. It was agreed that, if possible, former residents would be interviewed, as well. Over a one-year period, from two classes, fourteen interviews were completed. Initially, I had expected more students would want to participate, but I then realized that not everyone wants to be Barbara Walters or Dan Rather.

It was interesting to see which students chose this project. They were not all the best students, some, in fact, were doing poorly in testing situations. One was a woman who, after many years, had taken the GED and was returning to school. Another was a student who had proclaimed on the first day that she never got along with her instructors. One student, very quiet in class, had walked into two judges' offices and announced that she was there to interview them for an important oral history being done.

There was a wide range of people interviewed. It included the judges, one Anglo and the other Hispanic. The Mexican-American judge's interview included a description of his life as a shoe shine boy in the 1940's in the Ward.

> I could not enter a cafe to shine shoes because I was Mexican-American and only white people who were shoe shine boys could enter the cafe with no questions asked--even at barber shops-- a Mexican-American could not enter to get a haircut.

He later described how payrones (political bosses) ran the neighborhoods and the Ward.

Manuel Crespo, 75, the owner of the largest funeral home in the area, gave us a wonderful description of the American work ethic:

> In the meantime while I was getting $13 a week I was leaving $5 a week in the savings and with that I applied on the purchase of the funeral home.

Irvin N. Turner was a 67-year-old white man with a tenth-grade education. Herbert Hoover was "a man of high pride and he didn't reach down to the level of the common man." The Depression was the time when he watched men riding the box cars through the city.

Willa Adams, a Black woman, who thought Roosevelt was a great man but that many people went hungry all through the Depression years. Ninfa Laurenza, the owner of the fastest-growing chain of Mexican restaurants in Texas, was convinced

that it was the support of the neighborhood that had taken her from one tortilla stand to a recognized leader in the business community.

The role of the churches was described by two members of the congregations. One student went beyond the interview and investigated church records, baptisms, death, and the cemetry next door to find out how Our Lady of Guadalupe Church met the needs of the community.

We also included an interview with an engineer who worked in one of the major industries in the area but lived in another section of the city. He was unsure that his company had any direct responsibility to the people's needs.

As tapes were completed they were brought to class to share with me and the other students. These students seemed to have a tremendous sense of accomplishment. One student, in the introduction, wrote:

> This is the first time an oral history project is being done here in Houston, to persons who have lived in the East End of Houston, who have risen from the bottom.

Another, at the end of an interview with a judge, declared: "I am very proud to have known someone from the East End."

I felt very close to my students. The project had enlightened me as well. I felt as if I had been allowed to share their lifestyles and experiences. If I was educating them, then they had educated me. I had wanted them to understand how their needs and wants were tied to others and I had come to realize that my own needs were tied to them. We came to realize that all groups in our society held some major values in common: success, work ethic, family, fear of rejection by society(discrimination). Class discussions centered on how these needs had been attained at given times. Many students were surprised at the similarity of the values of such a wide cross-section of people. We talked about seeing the differences in how these goals were achieved. The students were surprised that decisions and actions of the government, particularly the federal governmet, had real effects on people and groups. The interviewees sometimes could not remember the exact date of an event but they always recalled how it affected them. Willa Adams, on how the Depression affected Blacks:

> I think the changes have benefitted Blacks in one way and hurt others in another because the Depression is what started some Blacks on welfare rolls, have been on welfare rolls for the third generation.

Boyer and Kaplan, in Educating for Survival, have claimed that:

> truly educated persons move beyond themselves, gain social perspectives, see themselves in relation to other people and times, understand how their origins and wants and needs are tied to the origins and wants and needs of others. Such perspectives are central to the academic quest.[10]

I believe that the project was the beginning of that academic quest for the students who created the project and the students on other campuses, from different backgrounds, who had the opportunity to hear those tapes.

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1. Eileen Kuhns and S.V. Martorana. Managing Academic Change. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1975)

2. Innovation Abstracts--National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development, North American Consortium. "Community College Professionals: What Are Your Premises?" Edmund J. Gleazer.

3. Ibid.

4. Managing Academic Change, p. 2.

5. Houston Post, March 4, 1979. "The Wards of Houston: Neighborhoods Have Kept Their Residents' Loyalty...My Neighborhood, Even If It's Ugly, It's Home."

6. Ernest L. Boyer and Martin Kaplan. Educating for Survival. (New York: Change Magazine Press, 1977), p. 14.

7. Talcott Parsons, "Change in Ethnicity," p. 61, in Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan. Ethnicity: Theory and Experience. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975)

8. Ibid, p. 56.

9. Lester D. Stephens. Probing the Past.(Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1974), p. 14.

10. Educating for Survival, p. 54.

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